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ABSTRACT

This synthesis of professional literature concerning community, parent, and school interaction suggests activities for teachers and schools to promote parent involvement. Decades of research have shown that parental involvement significantly contributes to a student's learning regardless of grade level, or of parents' economic status or education level. Obstacles to parent involvement include time, cultural barriers, uncertainty about what to do, and lack of a supportive environment. However, evidence indicates that current teacher education programs do not place appropriate emphasis on parent involvement. Teachers and schools can promote parent participation by projecting a positive welcoming attitude toward parents, establishing clear and effective communication, listening to parents express their concerns, promoting parent networks, and recognizing and appreciating different degrees of parent participation. (Contains 44 references.) (LH)

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COMMUNITY SCHOOL AND PARENT DYNAMICS: A SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE AND ACTIVITIES

by

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The clarion call to improve community, parent, and school interaction is being heard throughout the nation. Federal initiatives such as *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning* (1994) and *America Goes Back To School: A Place for Families and the Community* (1995) are helping to amplify this call.

From a demographic perspective the renewed emphasis on family and community involvement is quite timely. School enrollment has been on the rise, and 1997 is projected to set a new enrollment record. The 53 million U. S. American children passing through the school house gates will surpass the baby boom generation's peak mark set in 1971 *(America Goes Back to School,* 1995).

For the United States to retain its role as a world leader into the next century, and for communities to continue to prosper, or in some areas to regenerate, more individuals and organizations will need to become involved in improving the learning experience for all children. Our society has simply become too complex for support entities to continue to function independently. Those individuals, groups, and agencies that have traditionally worked in isolation must acquire more cooperative behavior.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a synthesis of professional literature concerning the community, parent, and school dynamic and to provide suggestions for activities to teachers and schools to promote parent involvement.

Community

Corrigan and Udas (1996) cogently note in "Creating Collaborative, Child- and Family-Centered Education, Health, and Human Service Systems", Chapter 41 in the Association of Teacher Educators' *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education (2nd. edition)* that the concept of integrated health, human services, and education is a philosophy whose time has come. They express concern regarding the number of agencies that are serving the same clientele while the professional responsibility for specific services is often uncoordinated and dysfunctional.

Corrigan and Udas (1996) further contend that "poverty, emotional problems, family upheaval, drugs, AIDS, and other variant family concerns can place children and youth at risk of failing for reasons seemingly unrelated to academic matters but that directly affect a child's condition for intellectual/personal growth" (p. 901). Robert E. Allen (1995), Chief Executive Officer of AT&T, stipulates that:

> We have not traditionally linked the well-being of children to the success of business or the governance of nations. Yet increasingly we're acknowledging that upheavals in the American family aren't self contained-they intersect with business and economic circles and loop into the social fabric of this nation. As a society, we assume larger affiliation-that implies, not just family ties, but added obligations. (cited in *Employers, Families, and Education*, p. 3)

Adding an additional dimension to this issue, Henry (1996) calls for community accountability which uses information to bring the public and its schools closer together with the goal of improving the schools along the entire spectrum of performance. However, Henry cautions that information should not be used to criticize the schools and fix blame but rather to seek progress toward achieving desired goals.

This sense of interconnectedness between corporate America and the school community represents a symbiotic relationship, notes Ralph S. Larsen (1995), Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Johnson & Johnson. He states that "the strain of balancing career and family responsibilities has never been greater. Employees are our greatest asset. Helping them to be better

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parents can only help to make them even better employees" (cited *in Employers, Families, and Education*, p. 5).

Techniques for linking corporate American and the schools are varied, and include flexible time and leave policies, parenting for education seminars in the workplace, and specific programs such as Parents as Teachers (PAT). The PAT program is a home-school-community partnership designed to support parents of children from prebirth to age 5. Home visits are conducted by parent educators, and participants are helped by parent support groups, and a through a referral network. A more extensive review of corporate-school partnerships and a resource list is offered in *Employers, Families, and Education* (1995). Henry, as well as Corrigan and Udas, provide extensive descriptive information about interagency and community programs. Corrigan and Udas (1996) conclude that:

> The concept of integrated service systems is being endorsed by the involved professions in the form of policy statements; by government in the form of legislation; and by the research and training arm of the professions through centers for the study of collaboration and the development of interprofessional training programs. (p. 918)

Parent Involvement

Three decades of research have demonstrated that parental participation significantly contributes to students' learning. This finding remains valid regardless if the child is in preschool or the upper grades, whether the family is of high or low socio-economic status or whether the parents finished high school (Coleman et al., 1966; Epstein, 1991a & b; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Keith & Keith, 1993; Linotos, 1992). Academic gains are not the sole beneficiary of parental involvement; other benefits include: enhanced student attendance (Berger, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991), a reduction in the student dropout rate (Berger, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991); an improvement in student self perception, motivation, and behavior (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Henderson, 1987); an increase in school advocacy constructs by both students and parents (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986); and a concomitant increase in parent satisfaction with teachers (Rich, 1988).

Why is the parent-school partnership not rock solid? Nearly twenty years ago Lightfoot (1978) observed that while families and schools are engaged in a complementary sociocultural task they frequently find themselves at odds. In *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Leaning (1994)* a number of aspects of modern life that handicap the home - school relationship are explicated.

Time. The issue of time becomes an important variable with the emergence of two parent working families, the explosion of one parent families, and families in which one parent or both work(s) more than one job. The Families and Work Institute (1994) reports that 66 percent of employed parents with children in school indicate that they do not have sufficient time for their children.

Cultural barriers. America's schools are a conglomerate of children from different types of backgrounds. For example, many immigrant families do not speak or understand English. The language gap may be particularly significant for low-income families who have little or no education themselves. Morra (1994) notes that since the 1980's the number of poor Hispanic and Asian immigrant children in our schools increased dramatically. The problem of communications difficulty between teachers and non-English speaking parents may be under estimated. In addition, communication problems are not limited to non-English speaking families. English speaking families with limited formal education often experience difficulty in communicating with teachers because of drastically different life experiences, concludes both Comer (1988) and Moles (1993). In response to

these concerns, San Francisco's School Volunteers' Family-School Partnership Programs successfully target underserved parents, including those for who English is a second language (1997).

Uncertainty about what to do. The National Commission on Children (1991) suggests that many parents are simply unsure how to help their children learn. For example, Snyder and Fromboluti (1993) observe that the number of teenage parents has dramatically risen in recent years and many of these parents have not completed their own education.

Lack of a supportive environment. Family nurturance is only now becoming a significant issue on the national agenda (Clinton, 1997 State of the Union Speech). The Children's Defense Fund (1994) indicates that more children live in poverty today than at any other time since 1965.

Even with the above limitations many parents report they would be willing to spend more time on with their children if they were given more guidance (*Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning*, 1994). The report posits that greater family involvement is crucial if our students are to learn more, to achieve at higher academic levels, and to succeed in the general world.

According to Tichenor (1995) research identifies the importance of involving parents early in the schooling process. For example Epstein (1992) postulates that the quality of early partnerships significantly establishes relationships that encourage parents to develop a pattern of involvement that is sustained throughout the schooling years. The development of this pattern is particularly important because of the tendency for parent involvement to decline as children move from elementary school to middle school and on to high school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1986). Tichenor succinctly notes that if parents fail to become involved in their children's elementary education, it is improbable that they will become involved in future years. Consequently making parent involvement a central issue in elementary teacher education programs should become a priority.

School Interaction

The educational reform efforts to restructure our schools to meet the needs of an information based economy and the demands of corporate America are redefining the mission of schooling and the job of teaching, according to Darling-Hammond and Sclan (1996). They contend that the education of students must now emphasize thinking work rather than preparation for low skilled factory tasks. Darling-Hammond and Sclan further assert that educational success for all children is a necessity rather than a luxury for a chosen few. Schools are expected to go beyond "offering education" to ensuring that all children learn and perform at more proficient levels.

Consistent with the growing number of students in the schools is the growing number of teachers. Gerald and Hussar (1991) indicate that the number of full-time equivalent teachers increased from approximately 2.5 million at the start of the 1980's to 2.8 million by the start of the 1990's, and they project the number will reach 3.3 million by the year 2000. In accordance with this increase in the total number of teachers is the number of newly hired or probationary teachers. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the issues of teacher recruitment and retention, a comprehensive analysis has been conducted by Darling-Hammond and Sclan (1996). However, the increasing number of teachers needed has implications for teacher preparation that do warrant review.

Buttery and Tichenor (1996) assert that teachers holding favorable attitudes concerning parents' involvement are significantly more likely to include parents in the educational process than those teachers who have a low regard for parent involvement. To maximize the benefits associated

with parent involvement, educators must have a thorough knowledge of and appreciation for the importance of parent involvement. Tichenor (1995) contends that teachers need to be prepared to set up, manage, and maintain an effective parent involvement program.

In light of demographic changes that are forthcoming in the teacher supply increased preservice and inservice teacher education in community, parent, and school interaction is clearly mandated. Buttery and Tichenor (1996) believe that there is significant evidence to suggest that teacher education programs do not currently place appropriate emphasis on parent involvement. In a study of teacher educators conducted by Buttery, Guyton, Haberman, and Houston (in press) respondents indicated that that (1) educators have a role to play in improving the lives of families: (2) educators should teach parents how to instruct their children regarding homework assignment: (3) prospective teachers should be taught how to interact with parents; (4) teachers should be knowledgeable about the cultural backgrounds of their students; (5) teachers should have knowledge of health and other human services provided to the children they teach; (6) schools should offer after school activities for children; (7) parent advisory councils should have a voice in running the schools; and (8) schools should do more to accommodate the needs of single-parent and working families.

It is clear that successful community, parent and school dynamics enhance the academic and affective lives of children and teenagers. The following section is designed to offer ideas and activities to enhance that involvement.

Teachers and Schools Promoting Parent Involvement

Attitudes. The Dover Union Free Schools (1996) stress the importance of an education climate which encourages each child's maximum growth. Schools should project a welcome and genuine interest in partnership with parents, treating parents as equal partners in promoting students' learning. All school staff must demonstrate a positive attitude in interactions and invitations to parents. This attitude must be expressed in both oral and written communications, including the school handbook, teacher letters, notes, newsletters, and phone calls. The school climate should be warm and caring, not intimidating. A staff member given responsibilities to serve as parent-liaison (assistant principal, teacher, counselor, or other staff member) can help ensure the school is parent-friendly.

Communication. Schools must establish clear and efficient communication with parents, using a regular schedule of useful memos, newsletters, phone calls, and a calendar of activities for an entire school year. Printed information must be easily accessible, and readability issues such as vocabulary, length, clarity, color, and style must be considered. Since parents may not understand "educational jargon," schools can provide a glossary of terms to help parents understand school and the activities there. Teachers can present an evening Curriculum Fair to give parents a look at the school curriculum (Wherry, 1996). Parents should receive information packets, including school handbooks, emergency procedures, school and telephone numbers. Teachers should communicate class goals, and explain how parents can assist in students reaching those goals. Epstein (1996) encourages schools to elicit help from volunteers to supply language translators to assist families as needed. Technological advances such as voice mail systems for parents, teachers and students or electronic mailing systems such as "listservs" can assist schools in promoting clear, timely, and efficient communication with parents (LaBahn, 1995). Audiotapes and videotapes can be used to reach family members who do not read (Family Involvement Partnership for Learning, 1996).

Listen. The exchange of information with teachers and professionals can help in planning a better, more relevant school program. Parents have in-depth and long-term knowledge of their children, and they share the same goals as teachers—to educate their children. Schools should listen

to them express their top concerns—usually what is being taught, how it's being taught, and how school policies are formed. Wherry (1996) suggests that schools conduct a school "audit" to see if the school is family friendly. Polls of parents can be conducted at meetings, parent conferences, or through the mail. Schools who carefully listen to the needs and opinions of parents can provide appropriate and successful programs to increase the effectiveness of individuals, teachers, families, and schools.

Networking. Schools can promote a parenting network for parents to share ideas, information, activities, knowledge, AND an interest in the education of children. Networks work toward the goal of helping all families establish home environments to support children as students. Schools promote such networks by providing parent rooms or parent centers, whether a small space in the school's library or an entire room filled with materials. School parent centers include resources to help and lend to parents, even providing an exchange box where parents and teachers can drop off unwanted books, toys, and surplus household items and take or borrow them for their own use.

Further, the Center for School Change (no date) suggests that parent networks develop videotapes on parenting skills, or make a list of written parenting tips. Arranging learning opportunities throughout the community, networks can provide weekly or monthly clubs for parents, helping build parenting skills and trust between families and schools. Networks can promote their activities through workshops, videotapes, or by providing a day-long parent academy described by Wherry (1996) with short repeated workshops on topics of interest to parents (building self-esteem, language development, motivating children, discipline, etc.).

Parent networks can promote the joining together of multiple groups, agencies, and networks to solve problems affecting the children, the school, the family, and the community (Family Involvement Partnership for Learning, 1996). Epstein (1996) encourages parent networks to assist in planning service integration of the school in partnership with businesses, civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies, placing important parent information there and using those sites for extended school functions when appropriate. Networks can provide service to the community with students, families, and schools by designing programs to promote recycling, drama, or activities for seniors. Parent groups can assist schools and families by placing important parent information in parent centers, supplying information on community activities that link to other interests, including summer programs for students. One parent group reported by McConnell (1990) helped parents of Mexican migrant children learn how to be partners in their children's developmental and academic growth.

Levels of Parent Involvement. Schools and teachers must recognize and appreciate varying degrees of active participation by parents. Whether parents choose to assure that children attend school and complete homework or choose to hold an office in the parent-teacher organization, educators must not scorn the efforts of parents who support the education of their children.

Schools may wish to consider multiple levels of parent involvement, as reported by the Yale Child Student Center's School Development Program (1995). The first level of parent involvement provides general support and participation in school activities designed to stimulate interest. Also at this level, parents could serve on committees, attend conferences, or support school fund-raising or social events (Wherry, 1996). The second level of parent involvement involves daily school activities. Parents can perform clerical tasks, work in the library, or serve in a classroom to perform tasks such as reading aloud, tutoring, providing enrichment activities, lunchroom or playground supervision, or sharing personal stories. The third level of parent involvement is characterized by partnership in the governance of the school. Such activities could include holding a seat on the local

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school board, urging support of a bond referendum through political campaigning, or participating in funding allocations within a school. This level of parent involvement is often most controversial; school administrators and teachers may be reluctant to encourage parents to be partners in this level of school governance.

Summary

Interactions between and among homes and schools are critical for building an environment for learning. Our nation has long stood on the premise of promoting the education of our children, most recently including the goal of promoting significant strides in this critical area through one of the 1994 Goals 2000, "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children." For schools across the nation to reach this goal, educators, parents, and community members must "join forces" to work to promote significant relationships and activities that will enhance the effectiveness of our nation's schools.

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